

Degeneration X: The Artifacts and Lexicon of the Rave Subculture

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Degeneration X: The Artifacts and Lexicon of the Rave Subculture

The dizzying laser lights flashed in synchronicity with the pulsating bass of the music that bounced off the psychedelic warehouse walls. As my boyfriend and I mentally attempted to organize the chaos surrounding us, we pushed our way through the crowd of spasmodic lunatics who contorted their bodies in time with the music and lights. We located a couch in a room covered with cartoonesque, hyper-graphic graffiti. An androgynous man sat himself at my feet and began massaging my thighs, while a girl with her eyes rolled back into her head demanded that my boyfriend give her a massage. Just then the deejay laid his head in my lap, told me he was in love with me, and placed a bitter pill on my tongue. This certainly was the most bizarre method of earning three graduate credit hours I could imagine.

So began my two-year ethnography on the American rave subculture. The scene described above was my initiation into the underground subculture where rave kids, typically under twenty-one years old, are given secret invitations to attend private warehouse parties with dancing, drugs, and thousands of their closest friends. Because of my youthful and unorthodox appearance, I was invited to join the then-highly-exclusive underground scene and attended numerous raves in several major cities in North Carolina. Although my chosen subculture was not typically examined by academia, I conducted an academic ethnography of what Maton (1993) describes as a “group whose world views, values and practices diverge from mainstream North American and social science cultures” (747). As a result, I received three graduate credit hours for “supervised research

in ethnography” and conducted what may be the only academic ethnography on raves.

The American rave subculture is an alternative, underground nightclub movement promoting techno music, synthetic drugs, and teen angst: the discos of the 1990s. This paper offers an introductory glimpse into the rave subculture for members of mainstream culture. The exploration includes rave artifacts, lexicons, and mysterious rituals. Based on two years of ethnography in the rave scene combined with published documentation, a survival guide for attending raves is offered for the naive, but curious. To survive in the rave subculture, possessing both the artifacts (nonverbal communication) and lexicon (verbal communication) is imperative. Artifacts include appropriate clothing, essential supplies, and psychedelic toys. Examples of interesting and unusual artifacts will be used throughout the paper to give the reader a vicarious rave experience. Insider lexicon phrases include codes for illegal substances, group rituals, and dance music. The reader will be taught some of the unique rave jargon, so that he or she can speak “rave.”

Although there is no definitive source on the etymology of the term “rave,” most ravers agree that the term originally referred to “raving” about the secret, decadent parties. There is also no universally agreed upon definition for the term, but a few examples will serve to conceptualize the term. Bradburn’s (Jul. 1993) broad definition is of “a new phenomenon that is more of a spontaneous happening that brings people together for dancing in various locations.” More specifically, Saltonstall (1995) defines raves as “all-night dance parties that move mysteriously into the city’s abandoned warehouses or lofts for one night, like tremendous floating clubs, and then move on” (4A). Perhaps Reynolds (1994) captures raves best: “It is a self-induced hypergasm, a shared hallucination of the in-place-to-be grandiosity” (56). Raves typically share the common features of secrecy, mobility, youth, music, drugs, fashion, and attitude. These features appear consistently throughout the entire history of raves since the moment of their inception. Like so much of Generation X’s culture, the rave is sometimes said to be inspired by (or stolen from) the hippies of the 1960s, discoers of the 1970s, and punkers of the 1980s, according to McKusick (1992) and Smith (1992). Critics such as Garcia (1992), McKusick (1992), Tagg (1994), Hesmondhalgh (1995), and Zukeran (1995) debate whether raves are any type of social movement or the discos for the new millennium. As the name *Generation X* implies, American

youth is sometimes characterized as the generic generation accused of simply copying earlier American counterculture or European contemporary culture.

The origins of Generation X's raves are most directly rooted in the Acid House phenomenon in the UK in 1988, according to McKusick (1992), Smith (1992), Hucker (1994), and Lyttle and Montagne (1992). Acid Houses are clubs where kids can "drop acid" (take Lysergic Acid Diethylamide) and dance to music especially designed to heighten the drug effects. With more technologically advanced music and different drugs, Acid Houses began to transform into raves. Smith (1992) and "Rave summit" (1993) note that the British police soon began to crack down on raves due to the prominence of drugs, and deaths caused by a warehouse fire. Rather than give up on the subculture, rave promoters simply moved the scene to the US. Rosen and Flick (1992) and Bradburn (Jul. 1993) credit the Motor City as the home of the American rave scene as early as 1988. While others in the 1980s suffered from Pac Man fever and skin-tight Jordache jeans, Detroit rave kids feverishly partied to techno music in their baggies. By the early 1990s, large scale rave events could be found in Detroit, New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago, claim Rosen and Flick (1992), McKusick (1992), Smith (1992), Garcia (1992), and Mead (1993). In the late 1990s, raves have now spread to most areas. For instance, even a small southern town like Tallahassee, Florida, has a "legitimate" rave venue which legally operates. Although not as "hip" as secret raves in larger cities, "the Underground Cafe" allows Tallahassee ravers a place to dance and imitate the scene.

Even though raves may be lurking in middle America, most members of the mainstream culture are probably not even aware of their existence; those in the mainstream who *are* aware may attempt to thwart this counterculture. Because of this need to keep authorities from discovering and destroying raves, secrecy is paramount. Yet rave organizers need to inform kids as to the clandestine location. What is perhaps most remarkable about raves is their ability to draw thousands of kids to secret parties without the use of media *and* without alerting the authorities. Reynolds (1994) notes that raves with 2,000 or more kids routinely occur in New York City despite the fact that the New York Fire Department has tried to crack down on the parties. Garcia (1992) describes "The Love Parade" rave which had over 7,000 people and twenty trucks of musical and computer equipment, yet still managed to evade police. Smith (1992) and Garcia (1992) remark that even with threats of punishments and fines, one rave occurred with over 20,000 kids. DeeJay D. B. of N.A.S.A. (no, not the National Aeronautics and Space Admin-

istration, but the Nocturnal Audio & Sensory Awakening) dreams of “the Holy Grail of raves: Ravestock, an unprecedented giant gathering of rave kids,” according to “Rave summit” (1993: 28).

Before Ravestock can occur, potential ravers need to possess the proper artifacts. Artifacts are nonverbal symbols such as clothing, supplies and toys used to identify ravers. Clothing is probably the most easily identifiable artifact. Garcia (1992) identifies “[r]ave clothing [as that] which tends toward primary colors, patterned wool caps and untucked shirts emblazoned with peace signs, happy faces and corporate logos” (60). Typical rave fashions tend toward unisex and androgynous styles. Most kids, male and female, dress the same, as if to appear pre-pubescent and sexless. They are *sensual*, not *sexual*. McKusick (1992) says that “The kids seem lost in autistic bliss and you get the idea that they’d rather be masturbating than screwing” (22). Additionally, kids tend to be disproportionately bisexual since it is “considered chic to identify as bi because it’s seen as being more open to life’s possibilities” according to Gelman (1993: 70). To emphasize androgyny and bisexuality, males and females both wear childhood T-shirts, baggy shorts, and Puma or Converse gym shoes. Males who want to wear more formal attire may don black disco pants, low cut ‘70s shirts from Goodwill, and high heel clogs. Females in more formal attire wear baggy childish dresses, and funky sandals or high heel gym shoes.

Related to the theme of androgyny is childhood regression. The pre-pubescent look, such as covering up one’s body to hide gender and reverting to childish styles, is adopted to seem not only androgynous, but childlike. Rave kids frequently wear 1970s clothes or children’s T-shirts and silly hats to make themselves look young and sexless. They may literally wear the clothes of their youth. Examples of shirts include “Charlie’s Angels,” “Scooby Doo,” or simple child-like prints with animals. Hats include everything from huge, floppy “Cat in the Hat” top hats to pink elephant stocking caps. Additionally, some raves have themes where ravers must wear childish clothing like pajamas, Barney outfits, and futuristic outer space costumes. Gordon (1998) summarizes rave attire in her fashion article:

For their part, ravers have pushed baggy style to an extreme. “Whatever they wear, it’s got to be big, and I mean huge,” said Scott Richmond, an owner of Satellite Records on the Bowery, a music and clothing store that is ground zero to local ravers and rave disk jockeys. Pants . . . have legs

that are typically 38 inches around--bigger at the ankle than the waist. "They look like they're floating." (20)

Gordon continues:

[R]avers are so committed to their ultrabaggies that they will make them if they can't find them in stores. Gwen Berland, 15, a raver from Park Slope, Brooklyn, had a friend make her pants with legs that each measure six feet around. "It's hard to walk," she acknowledged at Satellite, where the off-the-rack pants cost \$50-\$90. Within rave culture, there are even subgroups based on style. Ms. Berland says she was making the transition from being a "candy raver," or younger girl who likes to accessorize with toys and baby-style jewelry, to being a raver with a more sophisticated look. One of her friends, Ike Young, 15, is known as a "Polo raver" because of his preference for mixing his Mom and Me pants with preppy items from Nautica, Polo, Ralph Lauren, and Tommy Hilfiger. (20)

Along with proper attire, certain supplies are essential to keep kids raving all night long in the physically demanding environment. The first supply a raver must have is a book bag. In keeping with the regressive theme of raves, the book bag makes ravers look like young school children. More functionally, the book bag contains all of the other supplies the ravers will need that night and the following day. In essence, the book bag serves as an overnight bag because raves typically run from midnight to noon, or at least from dusk until dawn. Some of the most important supplies in the book bag include: water bottle; items to suck (pacifier, suckers, and gum); and Vicks vaporub and oil. Because of the extremely high temperatures from thousands of kids dancing for twelve hours in an unairconditioned warehouse, a raver needs an ample supply of water. Water bottles or baby bottles are preferable due to the need for sucking. One strange side effect of the rave drug of choice (to be discussed later) is the need to suck on things to reduce tension in the jaws. Tightness in the jaws is also relieved by sucking on pacifiers, suckers, and gum. Pacifiers, called "nukes," are certainly regressive, as are lollipops and bubble gum. The final essential supplies are Vicks and oil. Ravers will often massage each other with baby oil to loosen their muscles. Additionally, they will apply Vicks to themselves and others to let it seep into their pores, especially their temples, says McKusick (1992). Supplies then become both practical and fun. "Trip toys" are purely amusing rave supplies such as gadgets and trinkets to delight and amuse ravers under the flashing strobe lights. Garcia

(1992) states, "A trip toy is something that will catch people's attention and make them smile" (60-61). Common trip toys brought by ravers include: yo-yos, bubbles, squirt guns, kazoos, games, and stuffed animals. Sometimes raves will supply trip toys such as rattles, Frisbees, and even gyroscopes. Raves typically have play rooms, such as a Twister room, or a room with ropes for swinging. Trip toys, like supplies and clothes, are useful for ravers and help identify them as part of the subculture.

In addition to looking the part, ravers need to speak the part. Like other subcultures, rave has its own lexicon, or in-group speech, to identify members and exclude non-members. Reynolds (1994) referred to the lexicon as the "semantic fuzziness of slang" (56). Although it is practically impossible to identify all the lexicon terms of a subculture, rave terms center around drugs, rituals, and music. For very obvious reasons, ravers need code words for illegal substances. The illegal substance used to identify ravers is methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA). "Each generation finds its own drug, however (hippies chose acid, punks sulfates or 'speed'), and this time young Britons chose MDMA or 'Ecstasy'" reports Smith (1992: 31). Not surprisingly, methylenedioxymethamphetamine is referred to by less cumbersome names, such as: MDMA, Ecstasy, XTC, X, and Roll. Most commonly referred to as X, methylenedioxymethamphetamine was first patented in Germany in 1914, but was not used on humans until the 1960s, according to McDowell and Kleber (1994: 127-130). They further reveal that X was criminalized in 1988 due to its effects on human behavior (127-130). The drug which was sometimes used in "couple's therapy" before its criminalization, is considered by some to be the ultimate party supply.

X's effects caused its popularity to soar due to its "capacity to induce feelings of warmth and openness" and is used "by young people as an ideal party drug," allege McDowell and Kleber (1994: 127). This "capsule of Zen," as Reynolds (1994: 56) refers to it, is "popular with teens and young adults at raves who see it as a drug that makes them feel closer to those around them, heightens their sensory perceptions and induces psychomotor restlessness relieved by dancing," according to McDowell and Kleber (1994: 127). Mengel (1992) reported that an experiment comparing the effects of X to Shaman drumming revealed that X gave people higher: empathy, physical arousal, sexual arousal, sensual arousal, orgasmic ability, elevated mood, level of expectation, and degree of control (127-130). Because of these desired effects, there is a large demand for the illicit substance. Statistics are still being gathered on the US use of X, but 500,000

people in the UK take it regularly, says Smith (1992: 31). In both the UK and the US, X “is easily obtainable on the black market,” alleges Garcia (1992: 60). Reynolds (1994) reveals that specific brands of X are named after 1970s sweets, such as Pez or Smarties (56), and McKusick (1992) adds that “Special K” is any drug enriched with ketamine (23). Depending on the location, X sells for about \$20-\$30 for a full pill about the size and consistency of an aspirin. Ravers report needing anywhere between a half roll and a few full rolls.

No matter how much X is consumed, there are serious dangers involved. Schifano and Magni (1994) record abuse symptoms including: aggression, psychosis, depression, panic, cognitive disturbances, outbursts, temper, changes in appetite, and chocolate cravings (763-767). Of all of the symptoms cited in this list, the ravers interviewed during this ethnography reported only suffering from changes in appetite. Other negative side effects reported by these ravers included changes in sleeping patterns, dehydration, and muscle soreness. But there may be far more serious consequences. Randall (1992a) documents fifteen cases of X deaths in the UK, primarily due to extreme overheating and blood clots (1505). These deaths are not necessarily drug-*induced*, but are drug-*related*. The amphetamine in X may induce ravers to dance longer, which in hot warehouses is extremely dangerous. Randall (1992b) acknowledges that as of yet, there have been no X deaths reported in the US, but some are expected as the popularity of the drug rises (1506). Surprisingly, the FDA is currently investigating a reported death by Herbal X (which is natural and legal) rather than synthetic X (which is manufactured and illegal).

Whether legal or illegal, as the popularity of X rises, so do the number of terms associated with it. Other lexicon terms associated with X are “rolling,” “trolling,” and “crank.” When ravers take X, they are “rolling” because they become so euphoric that their eyes roll back into their heads. If they take LSD, or “acid,” with X then they are “tripping” and “rolling,” known as “trolling.” “Crank” is cheap speed which will *crank* ravers up and give them energy with the side effect of making them edgy or *cranky*; hence the name. McKusick (1992) explains that ravers can also be “sledgied” into oblivion and “cabbaged,” like a vegetable brain (23).

For those who want to avoid chemical highs, there are natural methods, such as the previously mentioned “Herbal Ecstasy,” and “smart drinks.” Herbal Ecstasy has been legally released in “head shops,” tobacco and paraphernalia stores, for around \$19.95 for ten tablets. However, users report that it takes at least five

pills to get any feeling. Herbal Ecstasy is a blend of herbs, caffeine, and vitamins designed to give an X buzz without the hangover. Not surprisingly, according to Zukeran (1995), “most who have tried it say it isn’t nearly as good as the real thing” (6). (Since some ravers feel they need to take more Herbal X to get the same buzz, there is a danger of overdosing. Due to the FDA investigation and fear of Herbal X being fatal in large doses, some stores have stopped selling Herbal X products.) Luckily for law-abiding ravers, herbal highs still come in the form of “smart drinks.” Alcohol is passé, and smart drinks are the beverages of choice at raves. McKusick (1992) notes that due to the high temperatures, ravers drink plenty of water and vitamin-enriched fruit smoothies called smart drinks. A \$5 drink typically has a base of juice-blends with B complex vitamins, bee pollen, Ma Hung and Ginseng added as an extra energy supply.

Because of the prevalence of herbal and synthetic drugs in the subculture, many rituals exist to heighten the drug experiences. Insider terms for these customary practices include body and hand rituals. For instance, “roll aid” spells relief. A roll aid is a baby-sitter, someone who watches over a first timer, or a “virgin”; a “rub down” is what a roll aid or fellow roller gives someone to loosen muscles. One of the side effects of X is tense muscles, relieved only by a massage. Plus, since X heightens sensual perceptions, being touched is extremely intense. Rub downs may involve baby oil or Vicks to further stimulate the senses. These massages may occur in a “love circle,” a love-in type circle of ravers. In addition to body massages, hand rubs are also very popular. One ritual stemming from hand massages is a transference of energy called the “snap.” When someone is massaging another’s hand, that person will quickly snap their hand away, causing a loss of energy. The person who has been “snapped” will miss the other person and look forward to seeing him or her again. Another hand ritual is the “blessing.” Blessing rituals ensure that people have good X trips. One blessing is, “X out the bad trip. A perfect circle of endless light for a good trip. A kiss for good luck.” This blessing is typically given to the “virgin” by seasoned rollers. All of the body and hand rituals can occur in the “ambiance room.” The ambiance room is away from the music, so people can talk to each other and be in private. The room has fantastical art, typically painted on the walls to look like psychedelic graffiti. Ravers report seeing hallucinations such as faces on the walls speaking to them, or watching the walls as if they were cartoons. The drugs and the rituals work in conjunction with the music to create the total rave experience.

Being on the cutting edge of bizarre, alternative music is an elite privilege, complete with buzz words to exclude the mainstream. The music makes or breaks the scene. One rave deejay explains to Rosen and Flick (1992), "A great rave or techno record is like a religious experience. A bad one will give you a headache" (48). Garcia (1992) explains that rave music is a "galvanizing, metronomic beat of techno, a term coined to describe an intensely synthetic, hypnotic form of dance music that was born in Detroit during the mid-'80s" (60). It symbolizes the mechanized, synthetic, futuristic technology available to this generation. Fisher (1994) describes two basic genres that have emerged: silly and dark. According to Reynolds (1994), silly music is very hyper-spastic with samples of "kiddie TV," or funny sounds that appeal to the youthful spirit of ravers; dark music, by contrast, has eerie sounds with horror movie samples and shrieks to appeal to the Gothics in the crowd (56).

Whether silly or dark, the music is part of the "rhythm engine." The rhythm engine consists of the music, the culture, and the people. As implied by the term "engine," the music, culture, and people are considered mechanical parts of a synthetic machine. Reynolds (1994) likens rave music to a "mad inventor's contraption gone berserk" (56). Critics contend that the machine is very demanding of its human cogs. The culture reinforces the use of drugs and exhausting dancing, which are physically detrimental at best and fatal at worst. Exhaustion and fatalities are often the result of the spasmodic "b.p.m." The beats per minute (b. p. m.) are at least 120 b.p.m. or two beats every second, with songs categorized as 140, 160 or even 180 b.p.m. Unfortunately many inexperienced ravers may feel pressure to keep up the pace and may become exhausted, dehydrated, or even unconscious.

Ravers who can keep up the pace earn the right to give attitude. The attitude of the music differs from most contemporary forms heard on the radio. "Instead of the tension/climax narrative of traditional pop, rave music creates a feeling of 'arrested orgasms,' a plateau of bliss that can be neither exceeded nor released," according to Reynolds (1994: 56). Also unlike other movements, rave music has taken control of its own fate. When it was not played on album oriented radio, rave promoters hosted their own events with their own deejays. Bradburn (Jul. 1993) describes how, rather than deal with the recording industry, recording artists produced "white labels," which are self-recordings without packaging (32). The overall attitude is that the kids control the movement and have since its onset in America.

In conjunction with the attitude and mechanics of the music are “visuals.” The visuals refer to the laser and computer shows during the rave (as well as the hallucinated visuals). Sophisticated computer technology may be used to produce a phenomenal visual show choreographed with the music, says Reynolds (1994). More traditional effects are produced by fog machines, disco balls, and strobe lights. The ultimate goal of the complex musical and visual show is to enhance the effects of X. These X enhancers are “almost scientifically designed to heighten the Ecstasy rush,” observes Smith (1992: 32). “The basic blend of drugs and dance is beefed up by technological stimuli: computer graphics, laser holograms, and virtual reality installations. The goal? Transcendence,” claims McKusick (1992: 23).

This transcendence (a.k.a. rave movement) started with the Acid Houses in the UK and migrated to Detroit in 1988. As raves spread throughout the US, certain artifacts including clothing, supplies, and toys and lexicons referring primarily to drugs, rituals, and music bound the subculture together. Rave artifacts, lexicon, and music are starting to be introduced into the mainstream. There are, for example, currently four major national radio stations with rave formats. These stations and others also host legal rave events in local clubs where alcohol is served. Smith (1992) points out that rave tapes are available in music stores, including the first hard-core rave compilation called “Shamanarchy in the UK” (32). Garcia (1992) and Norris (1995) speculate that rave also may see its first major star, deejay Moby, (a.k.a. Richard Melville—relative of Herman Melville) whose album has been mass distributed. The first top 100 rave song, “James Brown is Dead,” hit the US charts at number 90, and international charts at number 10, note Rosen and Flick (1994). “‘James Brown is Dead’ is saying something to the kids. . . . It’s like ‘Roll Over Beethoven,’” they continue (48). The song signifies the death of the music of the previous generation.

Most ravers and observers of the subculture agree that the massification of raves that has already begun will continue to grow stronger. Most people also agree that this massification will cause the original ravers to lose interest in their own subculture. McKusick (1992) states, “The rave-knockers say that with the inevitable commercialization of the trend, raves are headed down the spiral that saw disco in the 1970s go from a hip ritual of the gay demimonde to the white suited silliness of *Saturday Night Fever*” (22). In fact, former break-dancer Shabba-Doo had plans of making a rave movie similar to *Saturday Night Fever* to educate the mainstream about the rave subculture, according to Bradburn (Jan.

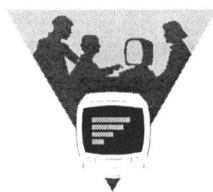
1993: 16). Even the recent controversial film "KIDS," which chronicles the lives of some New York City kids, includes a rave club scene and hallucinogenic drugs. The problem is that as the underground becomes mainstream, rebels will no longer be participants. "Like any underground social scene on its way to mass acceptance, raves have already lost their cachet with many of their early devotees," alleges McKusick (1992: 24). "The danger is that as the scene becomes larger and more commercial, it risks losing the cozy counterculture atmosphere that drew people to it in the first place," observes Garcia (1992: 61). So, if the bizarre rave counterculture becomes mainstream, what aberrant deviations of society will graduate students study in the future? The mind reels with the possibilities.

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